The University of Chicago

THE HUMOROUS WORKS OF GEORGE W. HARRIS

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE
AND LITERATURE
1942

By

DONALD DAY

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CRITICS have noticed that *Sut Lovingood's Yarns* (1867) by George W. Harris (1814-1869) is typical in many ways of the humor of the ante-bellum Southwest.[1] Yet Mr. Franklin J. Meine, comparing Harris's work with that of the other humorists, has stated that it is "strikingly different."[2] The purpose of this paper is to see how Harris resembles other humorists of the time and how he differs from them.[3] The study therefore may be enlightening as a detailed consideration of the claim that "in *Sut Lovingood* the ante-bellum humor of the South reaches its highest level of achievement before Mark Twain."[4]

I

Harris's life was that of a typical humorist of the section and of the period. Such a humorist was a man of varied backgrounds and experiences, having some acquaintance with books but usually more with the life that inspired the boisterous humor of the Old Southwest. Like the rest, Harris was more indebted to experience than to books for his materials.

Born in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania (now a part of Pittsburgh), on March 20, 1814, Harris was taken to Knoxville, Tennessee, when he was still a youngster.[5] Knoxville, where he lived most of his days, was to some extent shut off until the 1850's from

[1] George W. Harris, *Sut Lovingood's Yarns* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1867). Hereinafter this work will be designated as the *Yarns*. See Walter Blair, *Native American Humor (1800-1900)* (New York: American Book Company, 1937), pp. 62-101; Franklin J. Meine, *Tall Tales of the Southwest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), pp. xv-xxxii. The region designated as the Southwest includes Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas.

[2] Meine, *op. cit.*, p. xxiii.

[3] The scope of this study does not include Harris's political satires, which have not as yet been collected in book form. It does not include *Sut Lovingood Travels with Old Abe Lincoln*, ed. Edd W. Parks (Chicago, 1937).

[4] Blair, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

[5] Information furnished by Mrs. Amanda Pillow Harris Raymond, daughter of George W. Harris, hereinafter designated as Mrs. Raymond.

the bustle and stir of westward expansion by the Cumberland and Smoky Ranges. Yet the confluence of the Holston and French Broad rivers into the Tennessee furnished not only a connection with the outside world but also the essential conditions of a "river" community. At the same time the mountains, particularly the Great Smokies, offered a magnificently contrasting way of living. Harris, therefore, had ample opportunities for "seeing humanity in all its varieties," as he states in an early sketch.[6]

Harris's schooling was meager, probably not exceeding eighteen months, but he learned to be a careful workman in metals by serving an apprenticeship in the jewelry shop of his half-brother, Samuel Bell.[7] When he came of age he worked three years as captain of a steamboat plying the Tennessee and Holston rivers;[8] farmed for an equal period in the foothills of the Smokies;[9] and then established a metal-working shop in Knoxville which he operated for seven years, making and repairing anything from the smallest screw to a steam engine.[10] During the 1850's he established and managed a glass works,[11] again captained a steamboat,[12] established a sawmill,[13] surveyed and managed the Ducktown (Hiwasse) copper mines,[14] served as postmaster at Knoxville,[15] became an important political figure in the state,[16] and in the late years of the decade turned to railroading, which held him until the outbreak of the war.[17] After the war he again took up railroading, rising to a position as superintendent of construction for the Wills Valley Railroad.[18]

This background and experience certainly qualified Harris with enough knowledge of the life of the section to follow the literary manifesto of this "boisterous band of humorists" as set forth by

[6] New York *Spirit of the Times,* June 17, 1843. Hereinafter this publication will be designated as the *Spirit.*

[7] George F. Mellen, "Samuel Bell," Knoxville *Sentinel,* Oct. 12, 1916.

[8] George F. Mellen, "George W. Harris," Knoxville *Sentinel,* Feb. 13, 1909.

[9] Records of Blount County, Maryville, Tenn., for the years 1839-1842.

[10] Knoxville *Argus and Commercial Herald,* Feb. 1, 1843; Knoxville *Register,* June 26, 1846.

[11] *Spirit,* May 26, 1849; Knoxville *Register,* Sept. 29, 1849.

[12] Knoxville *American Statesman,* Feb. 10, 1854.

[13] Knoxville *Standard,* Aug. 30, 1858.

[14] Information furnished by Mrs. Raymond.

[15] Letter from 1st Assistant Postmaster General to J. Cleveland Harris, April 19, 1928.

[16] Nashville *Union and American,* March 17, 1859 ff.

[17] *Ibid.,* Oct. 2, 1859. Corroborated by Mrs. Raymond.

[18] Letter from Ben T. Brock to J. Cleveland Harris, dated June 15, 1928.

Augustus B. Longstreet in these words: ". . . the aim of the author was to supply . . . the manners, customs, amusements, wit, dialect, as they appear in all grades of society to an ear and eye witness to them."[19] Throughout life Harris followed the dictum laid down by Longstreet: he had the same interest in showing the life of his region. Typifying his attitude is a statement found in a sketch published in 1843: "I mounted my nag and started for the Knob, having seen some odd specimens of humanity; though such specimens are to be met with frequently in this mountain region."[20] Earlier in the sketch he describes some of the "odd specimens," together with the "manners, customs, amusements, wit, and dialect" of the region.

When Harris wrote his first full-length yarn, "The Knob Dance,"[21] he took material of the same sort from his experience, organized it, and put it into the mouth of a narrator, Dick Harlan. He also turned to his experience for vivid metaphors which he was to use so effectively in his later writings. His "A Snake-bit Irishman"[22] relates an incident which supposedly happened while he was on a hunt in the mountains of Morgan County with a party from Knoxville. The days of his youth, when he "was sent into the upper counties" of Tennessee on "a trip of business," furnished the background and setting for "A Sleep Walking Incident."[23] "There's Danger in Old Chairs"[24] records "a most amusing incident" which happened "not long since at one of the first class hotels, in a western city." Certainly by 1854, when "Sut Lovingood's Daddy 'Acting Horse'" first bodies Sut forth, Harris had encountered most of the material which went into his yarns.

II

Longstreet, in spite of his dictum, depended to a great extent on the Addison-Goldsmith-Irving tradition for his literary form. In this he was followed by other humorists of the South, particularly by Joseph G. Baldwin in *The Flush Times of Alabama and*

[19] O. P. Fitzgerald, *Judge Longstreet: A Life Sketch* (Nashville: Methodist Publishing Co., 1891), p. 164. In a sketch written in 1848 Harris states that what follows "would take the pen of a Longstreet to describe" (*Spirit*, July 29, 1848). Whether he was familiar with *Georgia Scenes* during his early writing days is not known.

[20] *Spirit*, April 15, 1843.

[21] *Ibid.*, Aug. 2, 1845.

[22] *Ibid.*, Jan. 17, 1846.

[23] *Ibid.*, Sept. 12, 1846.

[24] *Weekly Nashville Union*, Oct. 6, 1847.

Mississippi, and to some extent by Harris. In "How to Marry," published in the *Spirit* in 1854, Harris wrote a sketch which might have been hatched under the wing of N. P. Willis.[25]

Although he did not have much formal education Harris evidently read a considerable number of books. When farming at the age of twenty-five he possessed at least seventy-five books in addition to a Bible.[26] He was treasurer of a literary society in Knoxville whose library was said to already contain "many Standard works" and was "constantly receiving valuable acquisitions." Mrs. Raymond stated that her father was quite fond of reading and spent a great deal of time with books.

In "How to Marry" there are several allusions to the Bible; the Queen of Sheba is used for a comparison in "A Snake-bit Irishman"; Sut invokes Joseph as the "foredaddy" of the Lovingoods in "Sut Lovingood at Sicily Burns's Wedding";[27] Harris states in a note to Porter [editor of the *Spirit*] that "it is the general impression hereabouts that your 'Spirit' has played the Dickens with 'Boz.' "[28] He took the central idea in "Old Skissim's Middle Boy"[29] from *The Pickwick Papers,* as Sut admits in these words: "Charley Dickins's son, the fat boy, mout been es ni kin tu him es a secund cuzzin, ef his mam wer a pow'ful wakeful 'oman." In addition, Harris mentions Byron,[30] Burns,[31] Elizabeth Barrett,[32] and Longfellow.[33] There are also allusions to Mahomet's coffin[34] and to "Alborax."[35]

It must not be inferred, however, that Harris was vitally affected by literary influences. Probably his reference to Longfellow may be taken as a guide. Sut is singing a folk-song when George (Harris) asks him to stop the noise. Sut replies:

[25] There is evidence that he wrote a number of such sketches. Another sketch which is probably his appeared in the *Spirit* for October 28, 1854, under the title of "How They Do Things in Tennessee."

[26] Book "Q," p. 155, Records of Blount County, Maryville, Tenn., Dec. 23, 1840, records an indenture which includes "seventy-five books and a Bible" in a list of Harris's personal property.

[27] Nashville *Union and American,* April 15, 1858.

[28] *Spirit,* April 15, 1843.

[29] *Yarns,* p. 67.

[30] *Spirit,* June 24, 1848.

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Knoxville *Press and Messenger,* Sept. 29, 1869.

[33] *Yarns,* p. 124.

[34] Chattanooga *Daily American Union,* Nov. 27, 1867.

[35] Nashville *Union and American,* Aug. 10, 1866.

Well, I be durn'd! Calls superfine singin ove a hart-breakin luv song, what's purtier by a gallun an' a 'alf than that cussed fool thing *yu* wer a-readin, jis' arter supper 'bout the youf what toted a flag up a mountin by hissef ove a nite, wif 'Exelcider' writ ontu hit. . . .[36]

After more arguments Sut attempts to prove his song is a love song, then adds this illuminating criticism on Longfellow:

Now yu's a cussin at my luv song, I wants tu say a word about that 'Excelcider' youf ove your'n, what sum Longfeller writ. I say, an' I'll swar tu hit, that eny feller, I don't keer hu the devil he is, what starts up a mountin, kiver'd wif snow an' ise, arter sundown, wif nuffin but a flag, an' no whisky, arter a purty gal hed offer'd her bussum fur a pillar, in a rume wif a big hath, kiver'd wif hot coals, an' vittils . . . am a dod durn'd, complikated, full-blooded, plum nat'ral born durn'd fool; he warn't smart enuf tu fine his mouf wifout a leadin string; he orter froze es stiff es a crow-bar, an' then been thaw'd out by the devil; dod durn him.

This passage shows Sut's and his creator's preference for the stuff of life rather than that of romance. And it is not surprising that other models of form than those supplied by Longfellow's poetic creations were followed by Harris in his humorous narratives.

Far more powerful in the development of Harris as a humorist was the influence of the oral tale. And since oral storytelling "had an important influence upon the matter of most Western tales and upon the manner of many of them,"[37] his literary kinship with the humorists of his time and his section is best suggested by this fact.

The spinning of a tale became an art, and the material for these tales was inexhaustible. Eventually, most of them found their way into newspapers, popular periodicals, and books. The most popular humorous journal of the period was William T. Porter's New York *Spirit of the Times,* and in almost every case the better humorous stories sooner or later appeared in its columns. Harris gives evidence of this when he asks in the introduction to "The Knob Dance" if "your [Porter's Mississippi friend "In the Swamp"] . . . was at 'ar-a-frolick' while in East Tennessee?" He then promptly answers his own question by saying, "I reckon not or you would have hearn of it before now in the 'Spirit of the Times.' "

[36] *Yarns,* pp. 123-124.

[37] Blair, *op. cit.,* pp. 70 ff.

Thus, it was quite natural that Harris began writing humorous sketches for the *Spirit* and learned much of his technique from writers for its columns.

Harris's wide experience and interests must have constantly thrown him into contact with oral tales. His "ragged, thoughtless boyhood," untrammeled by schools, kept him among people. His earliest writings were reports of gatherings and experiences where stories were likely to have been encountered. His nostalgic remembrances of later days include "the old stone Court-house," quarter races, camp meetings, quiltings, cornshuckings, frolics—all gatherings where the telling of stories constituted one of the chief means of entertainment.

Harris loved a good story well told, and, according to the evidence, he was a good storyteller himself. When the "Patlander" in "A Snake-bit Irishman" tells long dry yarns, all having a more or less remote bearing on his own prowess, he is guilty of a definite violation of frontier etiquette and hence is suitably and properly punished.[38] A correspondent of the *Spirit* gives evidence that a "story is very good, particularly when you hear it told by S——l [Harris's pen name]."[39]

The development of Harris's technique shows definitely his dependence upon the oral tale. His earliest known humorous writings appear in the *Spirit* over the pseudonym of "Mr. Free" as "Sporting Epistles."[40] This form of writing, appearing in almost every issue of the *Spirit,* usually catalogues happenings in various sections of the country and almost invariably includes a transcribed version of an oral tale. Following this form in his writings, Harris gradually reduces the epistolary part and increases the importance of the transcribed oral tale, finally developing a framework or "box-like structure" which takes the place of the epistolary part and becomes, in general, an introduction and a conclusion. This permits him to emphasize the incongruities between the telling of the tale and the fantastic world into which the tale moves.

Other writers of pieces for the *Spirit* mastered the technique, and one at least (T. B. Thorpe in "The Big Bear of Arkansas") is as artful in creating a framework and its contrasting fantastic

[38] *Spirit,* Jan. 17, 1846. This version of the yarn must not be confused with the one appearing later in the *Yarns.*

[39] *Spirit,* Jan. 17, 1847.

[40] *Spirit,* Feb. 11, 1843; April 15, 1843; June 17, 1843; and Sept. 2, 1843.

world. But Harris does more in his *Sut Lovingood Yarns.* An obvious advantage comes from the use of Sut as the narrator and George (Harris) as his "stooge" in a series of sketches. This eliminates the characterization of a new narrator each time and progressively rounds out both Sut and George as characters, thereby moving the reader into the world of fantasy with the maximum of belief (or perhaps suspension of disbelief).[41]

A generalized statement of technique, however, will not explain Mr. Meine's conclusion that Harris is "strikingly different." Nor will it explain this statement by F. O. Matthiessen:

> He [Harris] brings us closer than any other writer to the indigenous and undiluted resources of the American language, . . . Harris possesses on the comic level something of what Melville does on the tragic, the rare kind of dramatic imagination that can get movement directly into words.[42]

The explanation of this well-deserved praise can only come from an analysis of Harris's writings which will bring to the surface characteristics that are uniquely his. For convenience the analysis will be made under the conventional headings of character, setting, action or situation, and language. Harris's satirical comments on the foibles of humanity, mixed into his stories like "two pints of bald-face in a quart flask on a hard trotting hoss," will be considered in a separate section.

III

Characters appear in Harris's yarns on two levels: first, those who are in the framework; and, secondly, those who are in the yarn told by Sut. The connection between the two groups is maintained by Sut; George (Harris) never enters the world of fantasy as a character (except in "Eaves-dropping a Lodge of Free Masons").

The framework characters help Sut get the yarn under way, relieve the monotony of the monologue, underline the incongruity, and then help bring the setting back from the world of fantasy to the world of realism. George, in particular, helps make this "queer looking, long-legged, short-bodied, small-headed, white-haired, hog-eyed, funny sort of a genius," appropriate for the strange

[41] Of course other humorists in the region used a continuing comic character as, for example, Johnson J. Hooper's Simon Suggs. He, however, does not use the "framework" technique.

[42] *American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. xiii.

tales he is going to relate. Here is how George qualifies Sut to tell his famous shirt story:

"Why, Sut, what's wrong now? You look sick."

"Heaps wrong, durn my skin—no my haslets—ef I hain't mos' ded, an' my looks don't lie when they hints that I'se sick. I is sick—I'se skin'd."

"Who skinned you—old Bullen?"

"No, hoss, a durnder fool nor Bullen did hit; I jis skin'd myself."

"What in the name of common sense did you do it for?"

"Didn't du hit in the name ove common sense; did hit in the name, an' wif the sperit ove plum natral born durn fool."[43]

When the yarn is under way Sut operates in situations on three levels, each of which demands a different type of character: first, in situations dealing with his Dad's world of "fooldom" (from which Sut stems) in which Sut helps his Dad to merited punishment; secondly, situations in which Sut gets out of his "nat'ral born fool" occupation and thereby comes to grief; and, third, situations in which "Sut's nat'ral born durn'd fool" endowments are pitted against supposedly respectable and intelligent members of society who are in reality hypocrites and whose intelligence cannot save them from his devastating punishment.

"Sut Lovingood's Daddy 'Acting Horse,'" as it appeared in the *Spirit,* November 4, 1854, the first of the Sut yarns, deals with Dad's world of "fooldom" and gives to Sut the following significant kinship:

Well, thar we was—Dad an' me (counting on his fingers)—Dad, and me, and Sall, an' Jake (Fool Jake we called him fur short), an' Jonass, an' Phineass, and me, and Callime Jane, and Sharlotteean, an' Simeon Saul, an' Cashus Henry Clay, an' Noah Dan Webster, an' me, and the twin gals, an' Cathrine the Second, and Cleopatry Antony, an' Jane Lind, and Tom Bullion, an' the baby, an' the prospect, an' mam herself. . . .

Obviously, this kinship, presided over by Dad, the "king fool" of them all, is tremendously important in the characterization of Sut. Significantly, Harris places this sketch first in the *Yarns* and then ends the book with another story of the same sort, "Dad's Dog School," in which Sut insists that it

[43] *Yarns,* p. 29.

happen'd ur ruther tuck place apupus, in our famerly; hit cudn't a-been did by eny urther peopil on this yeath but us, fur hit am plum clarified dam fool, frum aind tu aind. Dad plan'd hit; an' him, an' mam, an' Sall, an' Bent, an' me—oh, yas! an' the pup.[44]

Sut describes his first effort to leave his proper sphere in "Sut's New-Fangled Shirt."[45] He errs by following the advice of Betts Carr, who is "the cussedes' oman" he ever saw "fur jaw, breedin, an' pride." She persuades Sut to put on a "pasted" shirt and in getting out of it, after he has perspired and the shirt has dried, Sut loses a goodly portion of his skin. He swears "never again," but in "Blown up with Soda"[46] George says:

Sut's hide is healed—the wounds received in his sudden separation from his new shirt have ceased to pain, and, true to his instincts, or rather "a famerly dispersition," as he calls it, he "pitches in," and gets awfully blown up by a wild mountain girl.

Obviously, the supporting characters in the first two types of yarns are those suitable for bringing about a merited punishment for Sut's Dad or for Sut. In the third type the chief character (always a hypocrite) is to be punished and is given characteristics which merit that punishment. These characters are usually introduced by Sut in thumbnail descriptions such as that in which Parson Bullen is designated a "durnd infunel, hiperkritikal, pot-bellied, scaley-hided, whisky-wastin, stinkin ole groun'-hog" who preaches like this:

He tole 'em how the ole Hell-sarpints wud sarve em if they didn't repent; how cold they'd crawl over thar nakid bodys, an' how like ontu pitch they'd stick tu 'em es they crawled; how they'd rap thar tails roun' thar naiks chokin clost, poke thar tungs up thar noses, an' hiss intu thar years. This wer the way they wer tu sarve the men folks. Then he turned ontu the wimmen: tole 'em how they'd quile intu thar buzzims, an' how they *wud* crawl down onder thar frock-strings, no odds how tite they tied 'em, an' how sum ove the oldes' an' wus ones wud crawl up thar laigs, an' travil *onder* thar garters, no odds how tight they tied 'em, an' when the two armys ove Hell-sarpints met, then. . . .[47]

Mrs. Yardley is put "ahine a par ove *shiney* specks," and Sut warns that such a woman "am dang'rus in the extreme" because she is

[44] *Yarns*, p. 277.
[45] *Ibid.*, p. 29.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 75.
[47] *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

"a great noticer ove littil things, that nobody else ever seed" such as "that yaller slut ove a hen, a-flinging straw over her shoulder" of which she promises:

I'll disapint *her* see ef I don't; I'll put a punkin in her nes', an' a feather in her nose. . . . An' sakes alive, jis' look at that ole sow; she's a-gwine in a fas' trot, wif her emty bag a-floppin agin her sides. . . . what a long yearnis grunt she gin; hit cum from way back ove her kidneys. . . . sich kerryin on means no good.[48]

As a usual thing Sut works alone in his punitive endeavors. However, at times, he has assistants. Bake Boyd is a good helper because "thar wur durn'd little weevil in his wheat, mity small chance ove warter in his whisky, and not a drap ove streakid blood in his veins." But it is Wirt Staples, directly out of the rip-roaring frontier tradition, who is the best. Wirt brags:

I's jis' a mossel ove the bes' man what ever laid a shadder ontu this dirt. Hit wilts grass, my breff pizens skeeters, my yell breaks winders, an' my tromp gits yeathquakes. . . . An *I kin spit a blister ontu a washpot ontil the flies blow hit.*[49]

And Wirt is just about that good. Sut says that if the state fair will begin to give prizes for men, as it does for jackasses, he will enter Wirt and win the prize every time.

In Sut's fantastic world animals assume human characteristics. Squire Haney's horse

wer ove a pius turn ove mine, ur ole Haney wudn't a keep him a day. Nobody ever see him kick, gallop, jump a fence, smell uther hosses, ur chaw a bridil. He wer never hearn squeal, belch, ur make eny onsightly soun.[50]

Ole Mill's bull, with "fat, an' stumpy, an' cross-grained Old Burns" clutching tight to his back and with his teeth clamped onto his tail, reasons like this:

Ole Mills [the bull] dident begin tu onderstan' what wer atop ove 'im; hit were sumthing sartin what hed bof claws an' teeth, an'—*painter,* flash'd ontu his mine wif all the force the bill holt ontu his tail cud give hit. Dredful, dredful, tho't! His pluck wilted, an' he jis' turn'd tail tu the battil groun, an' went aimin fur North Caliney. . . .[51]

[48] *Ibid.,* pp. 135-136.
[49] *Ibid.,* p. 250.
[50] *Ibid.,* p. 288.
[51] *Ibid.,* p. 103.

These few examples give a hint as to the dazzling array of characters found in Harris's yarns. As has been shown, they operate in two worlds, one quiet and peaceful and the other teeming with action. Certainly, Harris faces a difficult problem in making the peaceful setting of the framework blend with one for his fantastic world so that his stories will not bog down in descriptions. He does this with such consummate artistry that his settings hardly seem to exist.

The necessary accompaniments for Sut's telling a story consist of a flask well filled with whiskey, a place to lie flat in the shade, or a log to sit on. The framework setting, then, may be "among a crowd of mountaineers" at "Pat Nash's grocery" or "beside a cool spring." Often the story is told to a group gathered around a campfire or while George is waiting for his "fool chain kerriers."

The setting for Sut's oral tale is seldom more complicated. Harris's criterion seems to have been to keep the setting down to an absolute minimum. With his uncanny facility for noting details, he could have described elaborate and minute settings, and in some of his stories (particularly "Bill Ainsworth's Quarter Race") he does so. He seems to have operated on a formula: the more fantastic the tale, the simpler the setting. For example, here is the setting for "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting":

> The morning cum, still, saft, sunshiney; cocks crowin, hens singin, birds chirpin, tuckeys gobblin—jis' the day tu sun quilts, kick, kiss, squeal, an' make love.
>
> All the plow-lines, an' clothes-lines war straiched tu every post an' tree. Quilts purvailed. Durn my gizzard ef two acres roun that ar house warn't jis' one solid quilt, all a-sunnin, an' tu be seed. They dazzled the eyes, skeered the hosses, gin wimin the heart-burn, an perdominated. . . .[52]

Note how little of this passage is actual setting and how much of it performs other functions. It is particularly important to note that these quilts are to be combined later with action to create a situation around which the story is built. Sut, operating behind them as a screen, prepares for a general "momoxing" of things by fixing a horse so he can break loose, then he

[52] *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

tore off a palin frum the fence, an' tuck hit in bof hans, an' arter raisin hit 'way up yander. . . . fotch hit down. . . . an' hit acksidentally happen'd tu hit Wall-eye, 'bout nine inches ahead ove the root of his tail.[53]

The resulting situation must be read about to be appreciated.

In other cases Sut uses situation merely for the humor which emerges from its incongruities. Old Burns, after an "onspeakabl bull ride," is thrown by the bull, his saddle gets caught on a limb, and Old Burns's feet, still in the stirrups, suspend him in midair so that

he foun his sef hung up by the heels like onter a ded hog, an two bulls a fitin round im, his voice wer changed mitely, fur his guts (and he hed a few ove em) bore down towards his hed, and hit sounded like he wur down in a well, ur hed a locust in his throat. He bemoaned his condishun powful, cussed . . . an talked orfull about shot guns, clubs, grave yards, and the brimstone works onder the kere ove the devil. I tell yu hit were tremenjus, cumin frum a man ove family hung up by the heels tu a tree, whar two dredful ole bulls wer at war. Wun got a running go onter tuther an backed him again Ole Burns at the rate ove pidgin flying, an toted the ole feller way out tu wun side, es fur as the ropes let em; an tu make it wus, he'd grabbed a deth holt onto a tail, and hilt es long es he cud stan hit fur his ankils. Then he let go and swung—tick, tick, like ontu a durnd ole clock what wur behine time an tryin tu ketch up. . . .[54]

These examples indicate quite clearly that it is situation, rather than setting, which enlivens Suts world of fantasy.

With a representative picture of character, setting, and situation, both in the framework and in Sut's world, in mind, the reader can see what an enormous responsibility and load language must carry, if these are adequately translated to the reader. In addition, his language must make up for gestures and vocal intonation with which the oral tale was enlivened.

Harris is a master of vivid metaphors. Lizzards running up Old Bullen's legs make a noise "like squirrels a-climbing a shell-bark hickory"; Sut's mam gets hostile and soaks "hickory ile intu" his back "ontil hit" greases his "shut buzzum"; and cursing runs out of an old Dutchman "in a solid sluice as thick es a hoe handil." The metaphors are reinforced by a vigorous use of verbs. When

[53] *Ibid.*, p. 143.

[54] Nashville *Union and American*, April 22, 1858.

mam tangles with Mis' Simmons, they "fit, an' they fout, they scratch'd, an' they claw'd, they grab'd, and they snatch'd, they knock'd, an' they hit, they grunted, an' they groaned. . . ."

As important as the vivid metaphors is the painstaking use of detail. When Sut describes a situation, he makes the whole come to life by a few details. See how this very complex situation unfolds its tremendous activity in a few words:

A monstrous cloud ove dust, like a harykane hed cum along, hid all the hosses; an away abuv hit yu cud see hosses tails an ends ove fence rales a flyin about, an now and then a par ove brite hind shoes wud flash in the sun like two sparks, an away a head wur the baskit [in Old Burns's hand on top of a run-away bull], circklin roun' an about at random. A heap of brayin, sum nickerin, the bellerin ove the bull, clatterin ove runnin hoofs, an a monstrous rushin soun made up the nize.[55]

Sut also uses details to bring out more subtle points. When he wants to picture his unrest in the presence of Sicily Burns he says:

My toes felt like I wer in a warm krick wif minners a-nibblin at em; a cole streak wer a racin up an' down my back like a lizzard wif a tucky hen arter 'im; my hans tuck the ager, an' my hart felt hot an onsatisfied like. . . .[56]

Thus language is used by Harris to fuse the other elements into a whole and bring them to life, and is itself made exactly appropriate to the character or situation, whether it be in the framework or in Sut's world of fantasy. Harris literally seems to breathe life and gestures and intonations and experience into cold words so that they blend with character and situation—so that they become men in action. But he is not content to stop there. After his matter is deftly spun into yarn, then wound into a ball of the correct size (or as Sut says, "I ain't like ole Glabbergab; when I'se spoke off what I knows, I stops talking"), he then sews it into a more compact and durable sphere by his satires on the foibles of mankind.

IV

In his earlier writings Harris is content to amuse. The gauge for "The Knob Dance" is "fun" which is appropriate to "a regular bilt frolick in the Nobs of 'Old Knox.'" Although amusement

[55] Nashville *Union and American*, April 16, 1858.
[56] *Yarns*, p. 80.

continues to be the primary purpose in his yarns, beginning with "Sut Lovengood's Daddy 'Acting Horse,'" he adds lusty licks at the foibles of mankind. In order to do this without freighting his stories with moral preachment, he gives to Sut's reasoning processes this characteristic:

> Well, I thinks peopil's brains what hev souls, am like ontu a chain made outen gristil, forkid at wun aind; wun fork goes tu the eyes, an' tuther tu the years, an' tuther aind am welded tu the marrer in the backbone, an' hit works sorter so. Thar stans a hoss. Well, the eyes ketches his shape, jis' a shape, an' gins that idear tu the fust link ove the chain. He nickers, an' the years gins that tu tother fork ove the chain, a soun, nuffin but a soun. Well, the two ruff idears start along the chain, an' every link is smarter nur the wun ahine hit, an' dergests em sorter like a paunch dus co'n, ur mash'd feed, an' by the time they gits tu the back-bone, hit am a hoss an' yu *knows* hit. Now, in my case, there's a hook in the chain, an hits mos' ove the time onhook'd, an' then my idears stop thar half made. Rite thar's whar dad failed in his 'speriments; puttin in that durn'd fool hook's what made me a natral born fool. The breed wer bad to, on dad's side; they all run tu durn'd fools an' laigs powerful strong.[57]

This is not a very abstruse explanation for a psychologist, but is a highly appropriate way to have Sut characterize himself. With this random kind of "hooking" provided for, Harris can "hook" that chain in Sut only when it makes the satire of a desired sort possible. Furthermore, it provides for a strange or unusual moral kind of "hooking." A "morril an' sensibil way" of running a quilting for Sut—one that is "good fur free drinking, good fur free eating, good fur free hugging, good fur free dancing, good fur free fiting, an' goodest uv all fur poperlating a country fas'"—differs from the ideas of "the ole mammys."

Whiskey plays an important part in Sut's world. This "barlm of life" is a sort of gateway, an approach, to the good things in life and it is itself the best thing in life: it is not to be enjoyed by those who damn other amusements. With this as a criterion for hypocrisy, the "Hardshell" in "Bart Davis's Dance" who lets his "shovel-shaped onder lip" drop outward "like ontu the fallin door ove a stone coal stove" and upsets a gourd of whiskey "inside ove his teef" so that the liquid goes down his throat "like a snake travelin thru a wet

[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 210-211.

sassige gut," is welcome. But when he puritanically tries to interfere with the "innercent mucement" of dancing which follows, he is appropriately punished.[58] This indicates Harris's chief hatred: hypocrites.

His satires, made effective by Sut's punishment, fall on many classes: women, circuit riders, lawyers, sheriffs, dandies, politicians, temperance workers, tavern "perpryiters," professors, pedigree hunters, and many other odious specimens of humanity. But it is at women and circuit riders—two groups which he particularly feels should not be hypocrites—that he aims his most frequent and best directed satires. A few examples of satires at these two groups will indicate his method.

Deceitful women are satirized in the person of Sicily Burns.[59] Delicacy is not the proper attribute of a woman, for as Sut snorts: "There never was a durnder humbug on earth than it is, except the delicates themselves, an' their appurtinances. Oh! its jist so."[60] But a strong-minded woman is worse. If such a woman gets after a man, Sut advises:

> . . . jist you fight her like she wore whiskers or run like hell, ef you dont, ef she dont turn you inter a kidney worm'd hog what cant raise bristiles in less nor a month, you are more or less ove a man than I takes you to be. Ove all the varmints I ever seed I's feardest of them.[61]

Old Bullen is Sut's particular hate among the many circuit riders whom he meets. The chief "pint" of this worthy is "durn'd fust rate, three bladed, dubbil barril'd, warter-proof, hypockracy, an' a never tirein appertite fur bald-face." He not only drinks whiskey, which he shouldn't, but also makes and sells whiskey, of which Sut says:

> . . . he puts in tan ooze . . . an' when that aint handy, he uses the red warter outen a pon' jis' below his barn; makes a pow'ful natral color, but don't help the taste much. Then he correcks that wif red pepper; hits an orful mixtry, that whisky ole Bullen makes. . . .[62]

Balanced against this odious group in Sut's fantastic world is a group of "right folks." For instance, Sut has a definite use for

[58] *Ibid.*, pp. 181-188.
[59] *Ibid.*, pp. 75-79.
[60] Chattanooga *Daily American Union*, Nov. 28, 1867.
[61] Nashville *Union and American*, June 30, 1858.
[62] *Yarns*, p. 86.

women. He thinks that "men folks wur made jist to drink, eat, and stay awake in the early part of the night," and that the women are made "tu cook the vittils, mix the liquor, and help the men tu du the staying awake." Here is his selection for a "helper":

But then, George, gals an' ole maids haint the things tu fool time away on. Hits widders, by golly, what am the rale sensibil, steady-going, never-skeering, never-kicking, willin, sperrited, smoof pacers. . . . They hes all ben tu Jamakey an' larnt how sugar's made, an' knows how tu sweeten wif hit; an', by golly, they is always ready tu use hit. . . . Nex tu good sperrits, an' my laigs, I like a twenty-five year ole widder, wif roun ankils, an' bright eyes, honestly an' squarly lookin intu yurn, an' saying . . . I hes been thar; yu know hit ef yu hes eny sense, an' thar's no use in eny humbug, ole feller—cum ahead!

Widders am a speshul means, George, fur ripening green men, killin off weak ones, an' making 'ternally happy the soun ones.[63]

In the final analysis, then, Harris writes humor which is "strikingly different" and which reaches "the highest level of achievement before Mark Twain" simply because he is able to take the same material and the same forms and to do more with them than the other humorists of the Old Southwest. After the war, when life which he has satirized becomes life which he hates and blasts, in one nostalgic effort he writes a sketch about the "good old days" with only the subtlest ironies replacing his usual satire. This sketch, "Bill Ainsworth's Quarter Race,"[64] gathers together the excellences of Harris, both in his selection of material and use of technique, mellows and softens his robustness without the loss of any of his strength, and, perhaps, rests at a peak of attainment in American humor.

[63] *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142.
[64] Knoxville *Press and Messenger*, June 4, 1868.